

EXODUS 20  
PRIORITIES AND BOUNDARIES

“What is life all about? How can I be the best person I can be?” These are big questions. These are questions that people still ask! They’re not everyday questions, but questions that people ask from time to time. The teacher asked that question: “What is life all about?” We might think that he would be know the answer, and maybe he did have an inkling, but he asked nonetheless, looking for confirmation, looking for an answer. Is life all about work? Is life all about family? Is life all about money and possessions? Is life all about experiences, thrills, the buzz that comes from an adrenalin rush? Radio 2 has been doing a series on what makes us human and has looked at it from all kinds of views; there have been different views and different areas of life – is this what makes us truly human? These are big questions! People are still asking these questions; these questions have not gone away; the sadness for me is that people don’t see these questions and the Church going together anymore; they tend to look elsewhere!

The teacher asked that question of Jesus; he uses different language, but it’s same question; “Lord, what is life all about? How do I get life right?” *“Of all...” (Mark 12:28)* Some of the questions asked of Jesus during the week before He died were trick questions, asked deliberately to put Him on the spot, trying to trap Him into the wrong answers; but this seems to be 100% genuine seeking after truth. “What is life all about?” How would you answer that question? If we’d not read Mark 12 this morning how would you answer that question in less that 2 minutes? Jesus’ answer is delightfully simple: “Love God, love your neighbour” – He sums up life in five words; He says more than that, but that’s the heart of His answer; love for God is to be whole-hearted, but “love God, love your neighbour” is what life is all about. *“You are...” (Mark 12:34)* He says to the teacher; the teacher has found the confirmation that he needed and rejoices in what Jesus has said.

The 10 commandments: Exodus 20. This is one of three pieces that I grew up having to learn off by heart at Sunday School. Along with the books of the bible, and the Beatitudes, we had to learn these and be able to recite them. This not the way we learn anymore, yet something stays. I was speaking to someone recently who had been at one of our Messy Church days and it took her back to school assemblies where she had been told the Bible stories in a dry and dusty way, but these same stories were told with life and enthusiasm and that made a good connection for her. The 10 commandments: these are God’s words to Moses and Israel; this is the way in which the community of God’s people is to live; this is how God’s people are to shape their life as a believing community. The people whom God has rescued from Egypt and are now travelling in the desert and God is with them - they are to learn how to live; they are to learn what matters, what are their priorities? Where do the boundaries lie? From here to the end of chapter 30 these principles are spelled out.

We’re on Mount Sinai. Moses is back to the place where he experienced the presence and call of God in and through the burning bush; the promise that God made then to him that Moses and the people would worship on the same mountain is come true. The people are camped at the bottom of Mount Sinai and have a deep sense of the presence of God there and that this is a holy place for them. There is something slightly scary about the whole experience for them and they are warned to keep their distance because God is holy! God speaks to Moses these 10 words and these 10 words have become the foundation of so much of our world culture. They are the heart of Israel’s life in the desert; the stone tables went into the Ark, a permanent reminder of God’s words to His people; how many church buildings have

had these 10 words painted on the walls; they are the foundation of Western Christian culture and our legal system and the way in which people live life.

“God spoke” – what does that sound like? Did Israel hear a voice booming out these 10 words? Or did Moses come away with a deep and strong sense in his heart that this is the word of the Lord for the Lord’s people? I don’t know if the answer to that question matters much, but it fits with the rest of the Bible’s sense of itself as the Word of God. The prophets said: “This is what Lord says”; Paul wrote “*All Scripture...*” (2 Timothy 3:16) God speaks to His people and has authority. We can’t discard the Bible and the 10 commandments easily or lightly because it comes from God; these are God-given principles for life and the living of it. More than that, these 10 Words express something of what God is like: “*I am...*” (Exodus 20:2a) and that is repeated over and over again to Israel. “You must be what you must be because I am what I am” is what God says. These priorities and boundaries that are given to the people reflect something of what God Himself is like; so we learn to be like Him.

The whole of life is here. The 10 commandments reflect every area of life; our relationship with God is there; our family life is there; our community life is there. Every aspect of our life is included in these 10 words; there is something here that touches everything that we are and everything that we do. The whole of life is here in another sense: there is something here about way we think, the way we speak and the way we behave. The way we think about God is here and the way we speak about Him; the way we think about family and how we do family life; the way we think about other people in the community and the way we order that community life. Every area of life is here and every thought, word and deed is here. There is nothing else! There is nothing missed out. Love God: the first 4 commandments are about our relationship with God, the way we think about God, the way we speak and how we behave. Number 5 is family life – our first priority after God is family; commandments 6-10 are about community, the things we do and the way we speak. Our desires are at the root of all of life, the thoughts that lead to words and deeds. The whole of life is here.

“*I am...*” (Exodus 20:2) Here is the people whom God has rescued, the people who have been loved by God, the people who have tasted the grace of God and that came first, then the same people are given these 10 words as the way to live life as this redeemed people. Because they are the people whom God loves, they are given the law by which to order their lives as individuals and as a community. As the people whom God has loved and saved, these are to be their priorities and boundaries and God sets that out from start. The spirit in which they are to live out these 10 words is a spirit of love and gratitude to God; this is not a set of chains to tie them down; these are principles and priorities that will set them free to love God and love their neighbour in freedom. We are the people whom God has loved in Jesus and especially in His cross and we are to love Him back. Isaac Watts great hymn *When I survey the wondrous cross* in the last verse says of our response to God: “Were that whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small; love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life my all.” (Hy 392 v.4) That’s the spirit of the 10 words given on Sinai. God has loved us, let’s love Him back and these are the ways by which we may do that!

These 10 words strike a chord with human nature. It is interesting to watch and listen to people as they describe their attitudes and behaviour. If you were to say to a lot of people in our culture “you must keep the 10 commandments” they will shake their heads, laugh slightly and maybe wonder why you still live in a world that belongs to an outdated past. But if you ask people what they value as important – family life will come top for most people. The first time I preached a series of sermons on the 10

commandments, I came to the 6th commandment “*You shall...*” (*Exodus 20:13*) on the Sunday after Jas Bulger had been murdered; I almost didn’t need to preach the sermon because the outcry right across the nation spoke volumes; there is still revulsion at murder right across the community. Adultery still creates guilt in human hearts – listen to Paul Hollywood this week on the radio. The Police still chase people who steal, perjury is still a crime and tale-telling still creates ill-feeling. Anyone who knows anything about human nature knows that the root of all sins and crimes is begins with the way we think, the longings of our hearts and minds, with greed, anger, jealousy, coveting While the culture might say that we want to push the 10 commandments to one side and pay no regard to them anymore, they strike a chord, they express something deep about human nature and what makes us human; the whole of life is here.

Here’s where it is hardest for all of us: “Love God” – the most important principle of life for Jesus; the first 4 commandments are all about our love for God. The one place where the pressure is most felt in our culture – to love God! When I was on study leave I was reading a little about what shapes us as people. We are shaped by our passions, by the things we love, by what we see as important. Then we act on these passions. So if our passion is for wealth and possessions, our behaviour is geared to making sure that we have as much wealth as we can and that we go shopping as often as we can. As far as our love for God is concerned, the point was made that many people in our culture would still agree that God is a good thing and that Church is a good thing too! We know that in their heads, but love for God and His Church is not passion for people; it is not a passion strong enough to make them do anything about it, like worship, or be an active part of the Church. But that is also so often true as well of those inside the family of God. We see family as important; we know it is important to be good people, upstanding members of the community; but we’re not too sure about love for God and loyalty to God; sometimes we see that as only for those who are keen. Love for God is the foundation of what makes us human beings; love for God is the first, best and deepest response to His love for us; love for God is what makes worship more than a ritual or routine; love for God is what people pick up from us when they come to visit our church.

Every community needs priorities and boundaries. Without priorities and boundaries any community will fall apart, and cease to function. God gave His people priorities and boundaries, we call them the 10 commandments. They still ring true; they still strike a chord with people across the world because this is what being human is all about. What is life all about? “Love God, love your neighbour” How do I love God? “See how God has loved you and love Him back with a deep sense of loyalty.” How do I love my neighbour? “Take care of your family and love people with respect and compassion.” Community priorities and boundaries work only when these are priorities and boundaries of the individual, that these are things to which we sign up; that these become a personal commitment, a personal responsibility, that these become our priorities as individuals. We are the people whom God has loved; learn to love Him back with all your heart. We are the people whom God has loved; learn to love your neighbour as yourself!